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PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1990-1991

Conference services at Vienna

Report of the Secretary-General

I. BACKGROUND

1. At its forty-fourth session, the General Assembly, in section VIII of its resolution 44/201 A of 21 December 1989, endorsed the view of the Secretary-General 1/ that a single conference-servicing facility at the Vienna International Centre would represent the ideal solution from the standpoint of cost efficiency and that a unified service operated by the United Nations would be best equipped to promote the most efficient and effective use of scarce resources. The Assembly requested the Secretary-General to "take appropriate measures with a view to expediting consultations with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization and other interested parties on the subject and to making practical arrangements for the establishment of a unified conference-servicing facility at the Vienna International Centre, as recommended by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions in paragraph 4 of its report". 2/
2. The Advisory Committee had recommended that the Assembly request the Secretary-General, "taking into account views previously expressed by the Assembly, the Joint Inspection Unit and the Advisory Committee, to take early action to reopen consultations with all interested parties on this subject, with a view to arriving at practical arrangements for the establishment of unified conference services at Vienna at the earliest possible date" and had proposed that the Secretary-General "submit a report on the outcome of these consultations to the General Assembly, at the latest, by its forty-fifth session". 3/
3. In compliance with the above request, the Under-Secretary-General for Conference Services and Special Assignments and other officials of the Secretariat

held consultations with their counterparts at the United Nations Office at Vienna, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) during April and May 1990. There was a useful exchange of views, but no conclusive agreements were reached. The Joint Advisory Committee for Conference Services at Vienna established in February 1986, upon agreement between the executive heads of the United Nations Office at Vienna, UNIDO and IAEA, resumed its meetings early in May 1990 and is expected to present its findings and recommendations to the Directors-General of the United Nations Office at Vienna, UNIDO and IAEA during the first quarter of 1991.

II. PRESENT SITUATION

4. Developments between 1987 and 1989 were described in the report of the Secretary-General on conference services at Vienna submitted to the General Assembly at its forty-fourth session. ^{1/} At present, the joint UNIDO/United Nations conference services administered by UNIDO provide translation, terminology and reference services, typing/word-processing services, editorial and documents control services and publishing and distribution services for conferences and meetings of UNIDO and the United Nations. Most of the established posts for these services are included in the staffing table of UNIDO and financed from the regular budget of that organization, although a substantial portion of the translation and support posts are financed under section 29 of the United Nations programme budget. The United Nations operates a joint United Nations/UNIDO meetings planning and interpretation service with the established posts included in section 29 of the programme budget of the United Nations. IAEA maintains a separate conference service, although it does, on occasion, use the services of interpreters assigned to the joint United Nations/UNIDO interpretation service on a cost-reimbursable basis. Under a Memorandum of Understanding of 1977 concerning the organization of common services at the Vienna International Centre, IAEA provides printing and reproduction services to all organizations at the Centre. In addition, UNIDO maintains a limited reproduction capacity, used mainly for in-session documentation.

5. The conference-servicing resources now available at the Vienna International Centre are described in greater detail in the annex to the present report.

III. ESTABLISHMENT OF UNIFIED CONFERENCE SERVICES

A. Criteria of the Joint Inspection Unit

6. In the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) on common services at the Vienna International Centre, ^{4/} the Inspectors referred with approval to the following principles which the three organizations of the Vienna International Centre had developed to guide them in their review of the Memorandum of Understanding of 1977:

(a) Common services are established for the purpose of realizing economies without loss of effectiveness, efficiency or quality of the service;

(b) Common services must be viewed as a partnership.

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7. The Inspectors observed that these two principles implied that common services must offer:

- (a) Cost-benefit for all participants;
- (b) Effectiveness, efficiency and quality of services;
- (c) Partnership in the operation of services.

8. To these points, the Inspectors added the following considerations to be kept in mind in reviewing proposals for common services:

(a) Whenever more than one organization of the United Nations system is based in the same city, the use of common service arrangements should be considered as a matter of course;

(b) All administrative services should be subject to investigation for common arrangements;

(c) In selecting the most suitable organization to provide the service, the twin attributes of experience and availability of resources (financial, human and physical) remain paramount.

9. The Inspectors also considered that it would be useful to apply additional criteria to determining whether a particular service is suitable for administration as a common service. They are reproduced below:

(a) Policy objectives:

Does the service require setting major policy objectives for its proper functioning? If it does, and there are likely to be objectives that are fundamentally different between organizations, and if these objectives cannot be made compatible, then admittance to common arrangements will be circumspect.

(b) Responsibility:

Would the pooling of services impinge upon the ability of the participating organizations to discharge efficiently their responsibilities?

(c) Confidentiality:

Would the degree of confidentiality required in the operation of the service be such as to cause rejection?

(d) Conflict of priorities:

Is there likely to be a conflict of priorities between the provider of services and the user? Are these so fundamental that they cannot be resolved?

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(e) Employer/employee relationship:

Is the legal and personal bond between employer and employee likely to be impaired?

B. Application of criteria in the 1987 review

10. These criteria set forth by JIU were applied by the Joint Advisory Committee for Conference Services in its 1987 study. The Committee concluded that conference services were suitable in principle for operation as a common service, although some reservations were expressed by the representatives of IAEA. One of the reservations related to the requirement that IAEA interpreters and translators have very strong specialized technical qualifications, although they need not have passed the United Nations competitive examination. Representatives of IAEA also expressed concern about the establishment of appropriate priorities for work in a common service; representatives of UNIDO and of the United Nations, on the other hand, stated that no significant problems had been encountered in establishing priorities in their joint services.

11. Once it was decided that conference services would, in principle, be suitable for operation as a common service, it was then necessary to consider whether a common conference service would meet the criteria of economy, effectiveness and efficiency. There was agreement that the provision of high quality interpretation services was essential to the ability of the organizations to discharge their responsibilities efficiently, and a common service would have to respond fully to that requirement. Conflicts of priorities were recognized as a possibility but could be avoided in a well run service. With respect to employer-employee relationships, interim arrangements would have to be found to accommodate the present regular staff of IAEA within a common service since they had not necessarily passed the United Nations interpreter examination.

C. Assessment of the present situation

12. In the view of the United Nations, the 1987 review did not reveal any major obstacles to the establishment of a unified conference service. The policy objectives of the service are the same for all three organizations; the pooling of services would not impinge upon the ability of the participating organizations to discharge their responsibilities efficiently; and confidentiality does not pose a problem.

13. The present arrangements between the United Nations and UNIDO for conference servicing at Vienna, adopted at the time of the conversion of UNIDO into a specialized agency, were intended to cover a brief transitional period until more permanent arrangements could be decided upon on the basis of an analysis of the experience and the actual requirements of the Vienna-based organizations and the necessary budgetary and administrative arrangements could be concluded. The delay in deciding upon more permanent arrangements has meant that the full benefits which a unified conference service could offer have not been realized, and has resulted in hardships for the conference-servicing staff, who were specifically not included

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in the agreement between the United Nations and UNIDO on the contractual status of staff and therefore are uncertain as to their prospects for career development. These staff members hold United Nations letters of appointment but are not fully integrated into the career development system of the United Nations.

14. The generally satisfactory technical operation of the joint services administered by the United Nations and UNIDO respectively has demonstrated that the operation of a common service would not present insurmountable problems of observing proper priorities and ensuring that appropriate, high quality and timely services are provided to each organization. The conviction that conference servicing is, both in principle and in practice, well suited to administration as a common service seems justified by experience to date: both UNIDO and the United Nations have expressed satisfaction with the technical quality of the operation of the joint services and both would be prepared to administer conference services as a common service.

15. Since all of the activities of conference servicing are part of a single integrated process, the two joint services should now be combined to form a single unified service for both the United Nations and UNIDO. This would respond to the recommendations of JIU and ACABQ and would leave open the possibility of eventual participation of other Vienna-based organizations, including IAEA, should they find it to their advantage to join the common service.

16. In its report on conference services at Vienna, 2/ ACABQ expressed particular doubts about the reliability of work-load and meeting statistics for Vienna, noting inconsistencies in information provided. It may be recalled that such information provides the basis for allocating the costs of joint services. In addition, ACABQ pointed to inconsistencies in the budgetary presentations of the United Nations and UNIDO for conference services at Vienna, concluding that there was an apparent absence of co-ordination between the two organizations with regard to reporting the estimated costs of the services apportioned between them. These observations highlight problems of control and co-ordination arising from the continuation of the transitional arrangements adopted following the conversion of UNIDO into a specialized agency under which posts are loaned from one organization to the other and it is necessary to account for income and expenditure in both organizations.

17. In addition to the benefits of economy and increased efficiency that were mentioned in the 1987 review, therefore, the establishment of a unified common service, for which provision would be made in the budget of the managing organization and with the cost of services provided to other organizations being reimbursed on the basis of agreed cost-sharing arrangements, would give Member States a clear picture of the total cost of conference services and the relative costs to each participating organization. The burden of administrative and accounting functions would be minimized, and all conference servicing staff would be administered under the same set of rules, with the same opportunities for career development. Furthermore, as has been mentioned in previous reports, in view of the relative levels of conference-servicing requirements, it is anomalous for the United Nations not to be responsible for unified or joint conference services at the Centre. 5/

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18. There are several benefits to assigning responsibility for the administration of the common service to the United Nations: by virtue of its long experience and well-established policies and procedures, the United Nations could ensure the timeliness and quality of conference services. Its global resources would permit it to provide such services in the most efficient and effective manner.

19. The JIU report recommended that, in selecting the most suitable organization to provide the common service, "the twin attributes of experience and availability of resources (financial, human and physical) remain paramount". In both respects, the United Nations would seem to be the most suitable organization. It has long experience in the establishment, organization and administration of conference services throughout the world, and it can draw upon a great reservoir of resources to meet a diversity of requirements in a timely, efficient and effective manner, while maintaining high standards of quality of service.

20. Of all the resources required for conference servicing, the most important by far are the language staff themselves. The United Nations has demonstrated over many years its ability to recruit, train and retain a large, well-qualified language staff and to provide a full range of services for a wide variety of intergovernmental meetings and conferences. The well-established and proven system of competitive examinations for language staff ensures the recruitment of staff of a high calibre whose qualifications and skills are further developed through a variety of in-service and formal training arrangements. Moreover, the career opportunities offered by a global network of conference servicing attract and retain highly competent and dedicated staff.

21. Physical resources are also important in order to use skilled language staff with maximum effectiveness and efficiency. Here again, the United Nations can offer important advantages through the application of technological innovations to many aspects of conference servicing. Word processing is now established in all six official languages, and the advanced telecommunications links being established between all major conference centres, including Vienna, permit the rapid transmission of documents in electronic form, so that the work-load can be shared by several duty stations to ensure optimal utilization of the available resources. Since the standards for the recruitment and promotion of language staff are the same world wide, this transfer of work can be done with no reduction in quality. Moreover, the capacity to share work globally among core staff reduces the reliance upon more costly temporary assistance.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

22. For the reasons outlined above, the Secretary-General remains firmly convinced that a single conference-servicing facility at the Vienna International Centre would represent the ideal solution from the point of view of cost efficiency and that, in view of its mandate to provide a full range of servicing operations for its deliberative bodies, the United Nations is best suited to assume the responsibility of providing conference services to all organizations at the Centre. Short of this, a single unified service provided by the United Nations for itself and UNIDO would provide most of the benefits anticipated from fully unified conference services at the Centre.

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23. Should the General Assembly agree with these conclusions, it may wish to invite the governing bodies of UNIDO and IAEA to consider the establishment of unified conference services at the Vienna International Centre as from the biennium 1992-1993. The Assembly may also wish to request the Secretary-General to formulate specific detailed proposals for such a service to assist the governing bodies of UNIDO and IAEA in considering this question. In that case, the Assembly may further wish to request ACABQ to review such proposals at its spring session in 1991 and authorize their submission to the governing bodies of UNIDO and IAEA.

24. The scheduling implicit in these suggestions would not permit the inclusion of such proposals in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1992-1993. Accordingly, the Secretary-General would propose to include provisions for conference services at Vienna in the proposed programme budget at the revalued maintenance base level and submit revised estimates to the General Assembly at its forty-sixth session, based on the reaction of the other organizations concerned and on the guidance of the Assembly at its current session.

Notes

1/ A/C.5/44/24.

2/ Official Records of the General Assembly Forty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 7A (A/44/7/Add.1-8), document A/44/7/Add.4.

3/ Ibid., para. 4.

4/ A/39/520.

5/ A/C.5/42/22.

Annex

DESCRIPTION OF CONFERENCE-SERVICING FACILITIES
AT THE VIENNA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

A. Documents control

1. There are two documents control units in the Vienna International Centre, one administered by UNIDO as a joint UNIDO/United Nations service, the other operated by IAEA. The functions and staffing of these units have not changed since 1987.
2. The UNIDO/United Nations Documents Control Unit comprises one Professional (P-3) and six General Service posts; the Professional and five of the General Service posts being established posts under the UNIDO budget for 1990-1991, and the remaining General Service post coming under section 29 of the United Nations programme budget for the biennium, from which additional support is also provided from temporary assistance funds. The IAEA Documents Control Unit comprises one supervisor (G-8) and seven other General Service staff, of whom two are statistics clerks charged to the Common Printing Service. The functions of the two units are similar, but the IAEA unit has an additional function of job costing and production planning as part of the Common Printing Service administered by IAEA.

B. Editorial control

3. There are two units in the Vienna International Centre concerned with editorial work; one is in IAEA and the other is a joint UNIDO/United Nations service administered by UNIDO. The functions of the two units differ somewhat. In UNIDO the unit is now part of a combined Editorial Control and Publications Section consisting of 16 Professional and 54 General Service posts; previously editorial control and publications had been separate organizational units. Most editing of documentation relating to meetings of UNIDO policy-making organs is done by the secretariats of the policy-making organs.
4. IAEA does not have a separate unit specifically responsible for editorial control, but it does have an editing unit within the Publishing Section which is responsible for editing all material for sales publications, carrying out a second proofreading of the typeset pages and checking the final page make-up before books go to press. The unit also advises scientific and technical staff on the preparation of manuscripts. The unit is staffed by 14 editors (10 English, 1 French, 1 Spanish, 1 Russian and 1 Chinese) and 3 General Service staff (2 proofreaders and 1 secretary).

C. Translation and typing

5. There are two translation services at the Vienna International Centre: one a joint UNIDO/United Nations service administered by UNIDO and the other the translation service of IAEA. Their functions have not changed since 1987, although

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four of the General Service posts financed under section 29 of the United Nations programme budget were eliminated at the end of 1989 as a result of the overall post-reduction exercise carried out in compliance with General Assembly resolution 41/213.

6. The UNIDO/United Nations joint translation and typing service comprises a total of 60 Professional and 60 General Service posts. Of these, 20 Professional and 15 General Service posts are established posts under section 29 of the United Nations programme budget. The remainder are established posts under the regular budget of UNIDO as part of the Languages and Documentation Division. To supplement these resources, translators are recruited on temporary assignment during periods of peak work-load, and there are also provisions for contractual translation services in all official languages. The Translation Service includes a UNIDO/United Nations reference and terminology unit consisting of one Professional and eight General Service staff (the Professional and five of the General Service posts are established posts under UNIDO's regular budget while three General Service posts are financed under section 29 of the United Nations programme budget). The typing pools use Wang word processing for all languages except Chinese and are electronically linked to New York and Geneva.

7. The IAEA Division of Languages forms an independent division within the Department of Administration. It translates documents and publications into and from the official languages of the Agency (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Spanish and Russian) and occasionally into and from other languages as well. It also prepares summary records of meetings in English and French. The present staffing of this division is 45 Professional staff and 41 General Service staff. There is also a small terminology unit consisting of one P-3 and one G-5 assistant.

D. Meetings planning and servicing

8. There are two meetings planning and servicing units, one joint United Nations/UNIDO Meetings Planning Section administered by the United Nations, and one IAEA unit within the Conference Services Section. The functions of both units are essentially the same. The functions and staffing of these units have not changed since 1987.

9. The United Nations/UNIDO Meetings Planning Section consists of two Professional and three General Service posts established under section 29 of the programme budget of the United Nations and supplementary General Service support funded from temporary assistance funds. During meetings, additional General Service staff are also recruited to provide such necessary services as conference clerks, registration and information clerks, messengers and ushers. Meetings planning and servicing within IAEA is one of the responsibilities of the Conference Services Section, consisting of three Professional and five General Service staff on established posts in the IAEA budget. The functions of the section are similar to but somewhat broader than the Meetings Planning Section at the United Nations Office at Vienna.

E. Interpretation

10. There are two interpretation services at the Vienna International Centre: one for the United Nations and UNIDO, administered by the United Nations, and one for IAEA; both provide interpretation from and into Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. The functions of these units have not changed since 1987.

11. The United Nations/UNIDO Interpretation Section is part of the United Nations Meetings Planning and Interpretation Service and consists of 20 Professional and 1 General Service posts established under section 29 of the United Nations programme budget, with additional General Service support funded from temporary assistance. The 20 interpreter posts constitute a full team of interpreters capable of servicing 10 meetings a week. The IAEA Interpretation Section is within the Division of External Relations and consists of eight Professional posts and one General Service post. The present staff provide interpretation from and into English, French, Russian and Spanish; IAEA relies on local and non-local freelance staff and on the United Nations Office at Vienna for Arabic and Chinese interpreters. The present policy of IAEA is to reduce the overall number of regular staff interpreters where possible, while still effectively meeting IAEA's specialized interpretation needs.

F. Documents distribution

12. There are two documents distribution units at the Vienna International Centre: a joint UNIDO/United Nations service administered by UNIDO and a separate IAEA service. The functions of these units have not changed since 1987, but the UNIDO/United Nations unit has now been incorporated into the Editorial Control and Publications Section.
